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## The Challenges of School-Based Assessment in Primary Schools in Malawi

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In 1994, the government of Malawi, following the first multiparty presidential elections, declared primary education free for all Malawian children. The introduction of free primary education (FPE) in the 1994-1995 academic year also brought about new challenges for teachers and education managers. Primary school enrollment rose from 1.9-3.2 million pupils. This tremendous increase, particularly at the lower grades, has resulted in shortages of classrooms, teachers, and learning materials. The overcrowding poses serious problems for teaching as well as for attempting innovative classroom assessment. It is not unusual to have 70-100 students in a classroom in the early primary grades.

As enrollments increased, a new primary curriculum was introduced. It contained contemporary material addressing such topics as HIV/AIDS, population and family life education, environmental education, and gender issues. The new curriculum, unlike the old one, which was examination oriented and emphasized only cognitive skills, is experience centered and skills oriented. This necessitates revisiting the current modes of classroom assessment. However, teachers are not yet prepared for this.

### Students Who Fall School-Based Assessments Are Not Promoted

During a visit to five selected trial schools it was noted that many pupils in Standard (Grade) 3 had repeated classes two or three times because they failed the teacher-developed, end-of-year tests. In a sample of 959 pupils (45.5% boys and 51.5% girls), 39.5% were repeaters. Of the repeaters, 21.5% were boys, and 18% were girls. The problem of repetition is a serious one because it contributes to overcrowding, particularly in the lower grades. Repetition is regarded as wasteful because repeaters reduce the intake capacity and thereby prevent other children from entering school. Children who repeat become overaged for the grade, eventually lose interest, and drop out.

### Assessment in Mixed-Age Classes

Free primary education has compounded an old problem of within-grade age range, which has now increased. Appropriate assessments are difficult for teachers to create when ages in a grade range from 6-17 years. The high percentage of repeaters (failures) may be caused by teachers' inability to both teach and assess in age appropriate ways. In Malawi, the official school entry age is 6 years. If a child starts school at age 6, the child should be 9-years old in Grade 3. In a recent research study, Hauya, Jere, and Nyirenda (1997) showed that in mixed-age classes, particularly at the infant level, age-appropriate assessments of learning were difficult to achieve. Older learners in the lower grades had a clear advantage over young pupils.

Teachers themselves admit that they assess the content they cover with little regard for the variation in the development stages of the children or how this variation influences ability, experience, and learning opportunities. Teachers tend to attribute high failure rate to teaching large and mixed-age classes. They persist, however, in applying pass-fail, end-of-year assessment procedures, despite the recent government policy stating that there should be no grade repetition in primary school (i.e., all students should be promoted to the next grade). School supervisors and managers at the district level also emphasized the fact that teachers were not really competent to teach mixed-age, mixed-ability classes. The teachers have no specific strategies for ensuring effective teaching and assessment for all learners.

### Assessment and Gender

Recently, the advent of FPE has provided more opportunity for learning. The government has made a deliberate effort to equalize opportunities for all students, irrespective of ethnicity, gender, and urban-rural dichotomy. Teachers' attitudes, however, which are fundamental to any innovation, have not yet changed. Some teachers still hold the view that boys perform better than girls in mathematics, English, and so forth. However, our investigation in the three trial schools showed that the differences between the mean scores of Grade 3 boys and girls in Chichewa (445 boys, 486 girls), English (454 boys; 489 girls), and mathematics (465 boys, 494 girls) were not statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ). But, as pupils pro-

ceed to senior classes, teachers' perceptions may persist and tend to inhibit academic progress among girls who are perceived as less able to learn.

### Summary

Malawi faces several school-based assessment challenges as a result of this policy of free primary education. Without enough teachers, huge increases in enrollment make for large classes and constrain the type of assessments a teacher can use. Continued use of pass-fail promotion and retention policies, based on local, end-of-year examinations, has led to large variations in the ages of children within grades. Teachers have not accommodated these variations, and their teaching and assessments are often inappropriate for younger children. Despite assessment data showing no difference in the performance of boys and girls, teachers persist in believing that girls are less able learners. This may result in long-term gender bias against female students.

A lot of work lies ahead to properly train teachers to face these challenges, while the government attempts to improve the learning conditions. It is hoped that teachers will be trained to use school-based assessment to improve and enhance the quality of primary education. Our teacher training should show teachers how testing can help pupils taught in large classes to learn more effectively and how teachers can improve their teaching, despite the problems outlined above.

### Notes

This article is an abridgement of a paper presented at the 16th Annual Conference of the Association for the Educational Assessment in Africa (AEAA), Lilongwe, Malawi, August 1998.

### References

- Hauya, Jere, D. R., & Nyirenda. (1997). *Feasibility study of age streaming in primary schools in Malawi*. Domasi, Malawi: Malawi Institute of Education.
- Jere, D. R. (1995). *Report on monitoring the implementation of the new primary school curriculum*. Domasi, Malawi: Malawi Institute of Education.

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